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ABSTRACT

Before teachers begin to teach Standard American English (SAE), the schools must strive for a greater tolerance among the public and the school community toward Non-Standard American English (NSAE) dialects. Through the use of a number of motivational approaches, students retain the right to their own dialects and language while learning SAE as a new dialect. The use of positive strategies and attitudes precludes the eradication of the much needed cultural heritage of dialect variety. Such approaches include: (1) using a reading program that includes writing models from various heritages and cultures as well as mainstream authors; (2) assigning short, impromptu theme papers or essay examinations; (3) providing information about the meaning and nature of differences in American dialects, the development and history of SAE and NSAE dialects, and the importance of tolerance for NSAE dialects; (4) using daily journal writing; (5) discussing and illustrating such verbal and rhetorical strategies as jiving, rapping, and playing the dozens; and (6) role playing in small dramatic situations that require SAE. The manner in which student essays are graded and student-teacher conferences are conducted can also affect students' success with SAE dialect and give them more respect for their own dialect. Adjustments to teachers' language attitudes, classroom activities, and evaluation strategies can increase students' fluency in SAE while respecting cultural, social, and regional dialects. (VVC)

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Students' Language Rights

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STUDENTS' LANGUAGE RIGHTS

This article revisits the issue of students' right to their own language with suggested strategies for motivating students to acquire and use Standard English.

What should be done about the dialect and the language of students who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, particularly minority American groups? These groups include those who speak Puerto Rican English, other Hispanic-influenced English, Appalachian English, Black English, Chicano English, southern and northern varieties of nonstandard white dialects, and other varieties of white ethnic English.

Students from these groups use their own dialects most of the day, and they use Standard American English only a part of the day. However, as these students prepare for a career, they are taught that at work they will have to conform to the language and the dialect of mainstream American society and thus use Standard American English or Edited American English. Yet one cannot rightfully deny the validity of the CCCC's position as stated in the 1974 "Students' Right to their Own Language":

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their own nurture and what ever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (Cover Page)

Relationships of Dialects and Success

Recent articles in dialectology point to the support of diverse American dialects. Jay L. Robinson, in "The Wall of Babel," presents many important linguistic facts that support the theory of similarities among all dialects. He states that linguists believe all dialects are equal. He further asserts with William Lobov (a noted linguist who wrote "The Logic of Nonstandard English") and other linguists, that:

> As linguistic systems, nonstandard dialects are not just equally systematic, but fundamentally similar to Standard English. The dialects differ in detail, to be sure, but not in kind; and because of their fundamental similarity nonstandard and standard are equal in their capacities to serve communicative, cognitive, and logical requirements. (424)

When such information is considered there are few, if any, legitimate reasons for denying Non-Standard dialect users the possibility of "success." "Success" in American society today comes mainly with job and economic mobility and social prestige among Standard English users. There are and have been damaging criteria for this attainment for many years.

Non-standard English users have been ridiculed and have not been given a chance to show their intellectual potential to function adequately especially in American society's intellectual world, social world, economic world, and in the job market. Roger Shuy in "Language and Success" (from Bailey and Robinson's book) sees a reason for the denial of "success" in the job market and in the social and the political American circles:

> In clear terms of relationship of a person's use of language and employability, then, it can be concluded that it is dangerous to infer anything about a speaker's logic or intelligence on the basis of his use of the language. Far more

> revealing might be the person's social status, his education, or his geographical origins. Furthermore, however tempting it may be to use a prospective employee's nonstandard grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary as a sign of his motivation or trainability, chances are that all one can accurately infer is that the candidate has grown up in a nonstandard English speaking environment. (308)

The denial of students' language rights has been the product of the purist users of the English language who have concerned themselves with the preservation of an elite SEA or EAE and have disregarded the development of American English and the existence of the rich variety of other American ethnical, social and regional dialects.

Importance of Teacher and Community Attitudes and Classroom Instruction in Training Diverse Dialect Users

In America, respectable instructors do not realize how much language and dialect reflect the culture and the world view of its users. These instructors do not see that a group's language and dialect are suited to the habits and the cultural needs of the users. A history of the American English language will show that as early years passed, American grammar merely tended to reflect or show early elitist grammatical usage and tended to perpetuate the myth that language should never change.

The need for the respect of the students' right to their own language or dialect is evident; however, it is impossible in America for us to realistically deny students the right to learn Standard American English or Edited American English as it has been so decreed by the elitists and the purists. Before teachers begin to teach SAE, the school must strive for a greater tolerance on the part of the public and the

school community toward Non-Standard American English dialects and for changing generally held negative attitudes about NSAE.

Moreover, in order that the motivational and instructive approaches for teaching about language and dialect diversity in America be effective, there must be "attitudinal changes" by "developing respect for the diverse varieties of English. Knowledge about dialects can reduce misconceptions about language and the accompanying negative attitudes about some dialects." (Wolfram and Christian 22). James Sledd further recognizes this importance of the CCCC "Students' Right" statement when he says, "I respect the `Students Right' because its framers tried to deal with just such realities and possibilities. They were not inimical to the teaching of standard English." (674)

Many educators have attempted to use a variety of ways to deal with the diverse social, regional, ethnical, and racial dialects. Some educators-linguists advise trying to achieve dialect uniformity by eradicating all NSAE dialects; others try to gain dialect uniformity by teaching NSAE to SAE users; others allow students to use NSAE in school, and they do not attempt to change it; and finally, others use bidialectalism in which students use NSAE and their home dialect with their friends and outside of school and in which the students use SAE in school with the students' being strongly encouraged to use SAE (the school language) most of the time in order to attain "success" statuses. All of these approaches have some drawbacks; however, I do encourage students to use their own dialects and to use SAE only when the need arises.

In order for most of us to respect the diverse dialects of our students, SAE or EAE which is the form of American English acceptable in our schools and colleges, in most places of employment, and in most social circles must be approached in the classroom in different ways. SAE can be taught to those who do not use it only if certain conditions prevail. These conditions are exemplary teaching materials and techniques, able and sympathetic teachers, and high motivation on the part of the pupils themselves with such motivation being instilled in the students by the teachers. See Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels who give the teaching qualifications that must be adhered to in assuring linguistically and culturally diverse students the rights to their own language. (p. 49)

Suggested Strategies and Techniques for Training Diverse Dialect Users

Through the use of a number of motivational and stimulating approaches, methods strategies, skills, and techniques, students may be allowed to have the right to use their own dialects and language when they still acquire a new dialect which is SAE or EAE. This policy helps us to introduce and use positive language strategies and attitudes and keeps us from attempting to eradicate the much needed cultural heritage language medium which is the NSAE dialect variety. These positive approaches also help the student gain economic mobility and social prestige in our American society.

One of the first approaches that instructors may use is comparing and/or contrasting grammatical features of SAE and NSAE. Hence, in dealing with Nonstandard dialect interferences with Standard American English in written and in oral student work, instructors should

concentrate upon one feature of a dialect at a time and concentrate upon the features that evoke negative or stigmatizing responses in our American society, thereby, helping the students to substitute so-called prestigious grammar or dialect features for the most stigmatized grammar or features of their established language patterns.

Instructors should not make a random correction of all so-called dialect errors or dialect interferences, and they should not try to teach students as though they are teaching them a new language. However, the instructors should instead systematically compare and/or contrast the American dialects and give systematic instruction in how Americans convert or shift from one dialect form to another form. Instructors may be called upon to translate between dialects and must have a clear understanding of the differences between the dialects. They should understand which forms are equal and be able to help students learn to select SAE forms when the situation calls for these forms.

Instructors must have an outstanding understanding of the grammatical and pronunciation patterns that their students use and of the ways in which SAE and NSAE differ. Finally, they should not be overly subject to feel that they will give "success" in immediately eradicating a "bad" dialect that differs with SAE through the use of isolated oral and written drills and other exercises. Those programs based primarily upon oral and written drills and workbook exercises have proven not to be overly successful, but elimination of dialect interferences can be achieved as we compare and/or contrast dialect features as they are presented in repeated written and oral student essays and short writing assignments based upon topics for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Less instruction in giving grammatical terminology and related drills should be substituted for more relevant sentence combining activities.

The conventions of Edited American English syntax, spelling and punctuation should not be overly emphasized in the writing process and certainly not at the beginning of the writing process.

Classroom Activities for Training Diverse Dialect Users

First, students should have an extensive heritage, cultural and mainstream authors' reading program of models of various types of writing so that they might become familiar with Edited American English syntax, spelling and punctuation as these forms are used in these writing models which they pattern their writing after. Students should also read and discuss materials and models based upon and containing the richness of their cultural backgrounds.

Second, teachers of composition should realize that student writing of long papers is not always necessary or desirable; hence, short impromptu themes, an essay type of examination, or any sort of writing that gives practice will also give fluency or confidence, is useful. Farr and Daniels give a list of useful writing assignments for nonmainstream writers:

> Such activities include reports from personal interviews of written surveys; descriptions of objects, persons, or places; analyses of social behavior, rituals, or values; comparisons of products used by students in their daily lives; and notes and letters related to personal or school issues. (57)

Next, teachers should be aware of and give their students information about American dialect differences, the development and history of SAE dialects, why Non-standard dialects exist and should be

tolerated, the meaning of dialect differences and the nature of dialect diversity, the meaning of dialect inferences, and the history and the development of certain Non-standard American dialects. Such information may work towards removing negative attitudes towards users of nonmainstream dialects and language and may give the users of these dialects a better image of themselves.

In addition, students may also write Journals in which they make daily entries, establishing their own writing format, writing style and fluency. The purpose of such an assignment is to help students narrate, constructively ramble, describe, interpret, reflect upon their daily experiences, get frequent writing practice, test their ideas and shape segments of their daily experiences. The students are to be reminded that the Journal is not the same as a diary. Some of this journal writing may or may not be in the students' main dialect.

Verbal and rhetorical strategies (e.g., the black American forms of shucking, jiving, signifying, sounding, rapping, and playing the dozens) that are used by most minority groups who speak NSEA dialects should be discussed and exemplified in the classroom for cultural and heritage sake.

Finally, role-playing is another technique that can be used in the classroom by getting Non-Standard dialect student users to learn new dialect patterns as they act out small dramatic situations. The students should not memorize the SAE parts of such people as newspaper reporters, policemen, and salespersons, but they should spontaneously produce the lines.

Classroom skits may also be written and presented to help students speak and act out realistic situations that are other than their usual role. Job related SAE oral or written projects may be assigned, such as reports, business letters, speeches to a certain group of job related people, and in job interviews. Skits may also be presented by students who must give speech styles used by people of different backgrounds, different jobs, and different social classes, hence, allowing for the use of varying verbal and rhetorical styles. Students may exchange and act out new roles in the skits, and, hence, switch styles as they do in real life (formal, intimate, casual, frozen, consultative styles).

Classroom Evaluation and Revision Techniques for Diverse Dialect Users

Also the manner in which student essays and papers are graded can have a profound impact upon the students' success with SAE dialect and language and can give them more respect for the right to their own language. Teachers need to re-enforce the students' use of acceptable SAE, but not to tear down their Non-Standard usage in a harsh manner. These instructors need to give critical comments that teach SAE, give encouraging words which instructors write on papers when they place a grade on them or which they say to the students later in conferences, and give constructive suggestions for correcting assignments, such as ways to code-switch from NSAE to SAE. Instructors do not need to belittle the students' non-use of SAE. Students should revise all written work as soon as it is returned to them. This revision may involve minor corrections to a compete re-writing of a written assignment. It is possible and highly desirable to grade one type of grammatical,

mechanical or rhetorical item at a time on all of the papers of an entire class and later to direct classroom discussions around this area of written composition. A two grade procedure is also desirable for a number of written assignments. In this grading procedure one grade is given for grammar, mechanics and usage; and one grade is given for content organization, coherence and rhetorical matters.

Individual Student-Teacher conferences (one-to-one) based upon oral and written compositions may be handled in a similar manner as the grading of papers is handled. Conferences are designed to help individual students with their personal written or oral language problems, and they should be regularly scheduled during the term as well as conducted on an as needed basis.

Teachers must reveal concerns with what the students are trying to say. Students must value the instructors as sympathetic, if critical, persons who expect themes to be individual and interesting. Otherwise, the students are likely to think of their conferences as help sessions, say on punctuation, grammar, usage or mechanics and their themes as routine sets of grammatical sequences properly punctuated. This is not to say that teachers will have spent their conference time unwisely if much of it is devoted to grammar, dialect interferences or mechanics, but ordinarily the teachers have done better if they show the students how they (students) failed to limit their subject, define their terms, arrange their materials or develop an idea convincingly. Constructive suggestions about how to eliminate dialect interferences can be lasting if the teacher goes about establishing come good methods for dealing with dialect code-switching. The well-planned one-to-one conference does

orally what the combination of marginal or terminal comments do in writing. These comments should not seek to embarrass NSAE speakers, but they should seek to aid them in theme revision and to teach them new things about composition through positive attitudes about dialect and language usage.

Conclusion

As instructors seek to use a number of approaches and strategies in order to encourage and give respect for the students' right to their own dialect and language, these instructors should finally attempt to reach a new goal which is expressed by Richard W. Bailey, one of the editors of Varieties of Present-Day English:

> Through the honesty of his persuasion, the teacher can create the setting for the student's growth in fluency and increased mastery of the written language. . . . Above all, he must recognize that his function is not to purify the language of his students but to extend it. (408)

A respect for the students' right to their own language will only result from the use of the "right conditions" by the teacher and the community. In order for diverse American dialect users to obtain cultural, educational, social and occupational benefits from their language and dialect instruction, teachers must adjust their language and dialect attitudes, classroom activities and techniques and classroom course evaluation strategies. These adjustments will greatly aid and enhance the students' abilities to obtain "success" in American society while helping them acquire Standard English.

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